Narrative of Peter J. Vieau

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NARRATIVE OF PETER J. VIEAU. IN AN INTERVIEW WITH THE EDITOR.1

1 This interview took place at Vieau's house at Muskego Center, Waukesha County, October 20, 1889. In *Wis. Hist. Colls*., xi, pp. 218–237, is given the narrative of Andrew J. Vieau, Sr., an older brother of Peter—one of the most interesting and valuable documents published in our series. To this the reader is referred, for a full understanding of this narrative, which supplements and occasionally corrects the former.— Ed.

I was born in Milwaukee, January 10, 1820, at the old furtrading post of my father, Jacques Vieau, near the present stock yards; my brother Andrew J. was born January 1, 1815; Nicolas, March 4, 1818—otherwise our family dates of births are as given in Andrew's narrative in vol. xi of the *Wisconsin Historical Collections* .

Our father, who was the first permanent white settler at Milwaukee (1795), was about six feet in height, and very corpulent; his average weight was from 210 to 215 pounds. His face was clean-shaven; his hair was light, and inclined to curl; his face was round and broad. He was naturally a temperate man, as to drink; had a happy, sociable disposition; and was popular among both whites and Indians—over the latter he held full sway.

In Andrew's narrative he says that father went to Mackinac from Montreal in 1793.2 The large *History of Milwaukee County* says it was in 1776; this is more nearly correct, although I do not know exactly when it was. He and his brother Nicolas went out there as young men, and engaged as voyageurs with John Ulrich, who traded in the La Pointe region, on Lake Superior. Father was certainly at La Pointe in 1782, by which time he had become a clerk

2 *Wis. Hist. Colls*., xi, p. 220.— Ed.

459 for Ulrich, and had full charge of the La Pointe post; at the same time, Nicolas was living in Green Bay. When Jacob Franks opened, in 1794, a post at Green Bay for Ogilvie, Gillespie & Co., of Montreal, father became a clerk under him. Having acquired a good reputation as a clerk, he was sent out from Mackinac in July, 1795, by the Northwest Fur Company, to establish posts along the west shore of Lake Michigan, with headquarters at Milwaukee.

Solomon Juneau came west from Canada to Mackinac, when he was a boy of but fifteen or sixteen years; in his company was another youngster, the two of them engaging as voyageurs under Louis Eaume, an old French trader. The lads had been students in a Roman Catholic seminary at L'Assumption, and ran away together. Father had known the Juneau family at Montreal, for many years; and when he met Solomon at Mackinac, found the boy badly in need of a friend. He was a fine looking lad, with a frank, pleasing French face, and curling hair, and father at once hired him, at first as a voyageur, then as a clerk. He went about the country a great deal with father, and I am under the impression that he visited Milwaukee in a humble capacity long before 1818, when he came to stay. He had married our half-sister, Josette, as early as 1814 or 1815.

In 1819, father disposed of his interests to Juneau, but soon reopened a post at the old place on the Menomonee River, at Milwaukee, as agent for Michael Dousman of Chicago. Thus he became a rival of Juneau; but it was a friendly rivalry, for both families were always good friends. Later, father traded at Milwaukee for Daniel M. Whitney, of Green Bay. In 1836, when white settlers were rapidly coming into Milwaukee, father, then 74 years old, retired to our old home in Green Bay.

As agent of the Northwest Fur Company, and later of the American Fur Company, father had control of trading posts at Kewaunee, Manitowoc, Sheboygan, and other places, as well as at Milwaukee, where we lived for many years, and where many of us children were born. When 460 father went out to visit his posts, each summer, he would take mother and the young ones with him, leaving the older boys to tend the store in Milwaukee.

In Buck's *History of Milwaukee* 1 is a picture of Milwaukee in 1795. I can vouch for its general accuracy, for the place represented is my birth place, my father's old trading post. The house at the top of the high bank was our dwelling. The warehouse was southeast of this, and hid by it. At the base of the bank was the house of a voyageur. The long boat represented was a Mackinac boat; but it ought to have four oars on each side, instead of two. The Indian in the boat is intended to be Meguin (the feather), a Pottawattomie; he was a great shot, as an archer; all the other Indians hereabout feared him, for he could shoot nine out of ten ducks on the wing. The buildings in the picture were destroyed in 1836 or 1837, at the time of the great land speculation. I have often heard my father say that when he arrived at this place, about the third week of August,, 1795, it was in the evening. He beached his batteau a little to the west of the spot where his post was established, and had two tents put up at the foot of the bank, one for his men, the other for the family.

1 Buck, *Pioneer History of Milwaukee* (1890 ed., p. 55).— Ed.

The fur traders of that olden time had many curious adventures, and witnessed many singular spectacles. I think it was in 1833 that the last Indian payment was made in Chicago.2 My father went there with a lot of goods, and to present some claims; for the Indians nearly always bought on credit, and were ever owing a great deal to the traders —claims which could only be collected at the time of the government payments, when money was plenty.

2 He probably has reference to the treaty at Chicago, in September, 1833.— Ed.

One afternoon the Indians were having a council. While it was in progress there swaggered into father's shanty, Sangaunauneebee (sour water), a Pottawattomie village chief from St. Joseph's River. He was rightly named, for he had a sour temper. Father had a big keg of tobacco in

Solomon Juneau's Trading Post at Milwaukee , 1825–33 (From Buck's *Pioneer History of Milwaukee* .)

461 carots (plugs). The chief took five or six carets (six or seven pounds), and began to walk off with them.

Father . What are you going to do with that?

Chief . I want to use it.

Father . It doesn't belong to you.

Chief . What of that? I am a chief, and can do as I please.

Father . You can, can you?

The chief pulled a long bowie knife, but father made a spring; caught the fellow by his neck and his breech-clout, and threw him out, the plugs of tobacco scattering in all directions.

The intruder sneaked off into the circle of the council, which was being held in front of the shanty, and father followed him a little way. Chepoi (the corpse), a headman of the Pottawattomies,—a frightful-looking fellow, with his nose cut off clear to the bridge,—now got up, and shaking his finger at father, cried: “Jacques Vieau, we have always heard you were a popular man, a benefactor of the Indians, feeding them when hungry; but today you have lost all, you have spoiled yourself, by doing that which you have just now done to our noble chief, Sanguanauneebee. Never again will you have the favor of the Indians.”

Father . Who are you, there, that is talking with such authority?

Speaker . I am the head councilman of the St. Joseph band.

Father . If I were such a looking man as you are, Chepoi, I should consider that the name you bear became me well. You, who want to show so much authority, go where you lost

your nose, and find it; then you will be a fit subject to come here to Chicago and make such fine speeches.

It required bravery and assurance to talk like this to the leader of a band of four hundred Indians. But father, who spoke Pottawattomie like one of them, of course knew his ground. The whole ring of savages, of whom there were at least a thousand in the hearing of his voice, burst out in vociferous applause. Chepoi, glaring fiercely at the impudent trader, sat down in chagrin.

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There were, I think, at this Chicago payment, five or six thousand savages of different tribes. It had much the appearance of a fair. A curious episode now occurred. There were at this gathering two young men who were the best of friends, as well as being two of the finest-looking Indians I ever saw. One was the son of Sanguanauneebee; the other, the son of another chief, Seebwasen (cornstalk). Both were courting the same young squaw, the daughter of Wampum, a Chippewa chief living at Sheboygan. They had proposed to fight a duel to decide who should have the girl. She had agreed to marry one of them at this payment, but did not care who.

This was the question being discussed at the council which was held in front of my father's shanty. The two fathers had submitted the question to the council, and it had been decided that the young fellows should fight to the death, the survivor to take the girl. The boys were brought before the wise men, and informed of the conclusion reached.

Then their ponies were brought, one a black, the other a gray. The duelists and their saddles were decked with beads, silver brooches, ribbons, and other ornaments such as the traders bartered with the Indians; the ponies' manes and tails were tricked out with ribbons, and altogether it was like one of those ancient tournaments in France, that I have read of in the old histories. First, the ponies were driven side by side one or two times in a circle around the council place, in front of the store. Then together, the duelists and their

friends started out for the place of encounter, swimming their horses across the river, and drew up on an open spot on the north side. Crude flags were hung on poles, which were stuck up in the sand roundabout, an Indian sign that a fight to the death was in progress. Indian guards were placed, to clear a ring of two or three hundred yards; heading these guards, and acting as seconds, were Chepoi and Seebwasen. A little outside the ring, all alone, stood the girl being fought for, apparently indifferent, her arms akimbo. The time was an hour before sundown, and there were present four or five hundred whites 463 and Indians. I was then in Green Bay, at school; but my father and Juneau, who were there and saw everything, often described it to us children.

One of the duelists wheeled to the right, the other to the left. Then they brought their horses sideways close together, head to tail, tail to head. Either Chepoi or Seebwasen cried, in the Pottawattomie tongue, “Time is up! Ready!”

At this each fighter instantly drew his green handled bowie, full twenty inches long. As they rushed together, there was a frightful hubbub among the spectators, Juneau fainted, so did many others. The Indian women rent the air with their cries. Such thrusts as those fellows gave each other in the back! The blood spurted at each blow. Finally Sanguanauneebee's boy fell over backwards, his arm raised for a blow, but with the knife of the other in his spine. A moment later, Seebwasen's son cried out in his death agony, and also fell backwards. Both died almost simultaneously. The horses stood stock still. The girl, now with no lover left, wrung her hands in frenzy.

When I was five or six years of age, my education began, at the hands of Michel le Pellieur, a clerk in my father's employ. In 1829, when I was nine years old, father heard of the recent establishment of the Episcopalian mission at Green Bay, by Rev. Richard F. Cadle,1 and Nicolas and I were sent there. Andrew, being older, had been at school for some time in Green Bay; he now joined us at the Cadle school. We remained there for three and a half years, until 1833.

1 See *Wis. Hist. Colls*., xiv, pp. 394–515, for documentary material relative to the Cadle mission.— Ed.

The principal teacher was John V. Suydam; others, were Mr. Gregory and Leonard Groom. The last-named spent most of his time in caring for the farm and buildings, but occasionally came in to teach. There were some two hundred boys and nearly as many girls; among them, many half-breeds and Indians —Oneidas, Chippewas, Sioux; and in 1833 there were at least two Sacs, a boy and a girl, 464 waifs from the Black Hawk War;1 they had come East as far as Green Bay, with Black Hawk's band, en route for Washington, and were left here. The boy, whiter than the girl, was dressed like a squaw; the girl was very pretty, with flashing black eyes, but had a quick temper, and the other children were afraid of her.

1 *Wis. Hist. Colls*., xiv, pp. 464, 465.—ED.

In the early summer of 1833, Suydam married Jane Irwin, of Shantytown, a sister of Alexander J. and Robert, Jr. He moved a short distance from the school, and soon left the institution. He contemplated starting a newspaper. I had been considered one of the best scholars at the mission, had taken several prizes, and was, I think, thought to be good and dutiful. So Suydam asked if I would like to learn to become a printer. Upon my consenting he wrote to my father, at Milwaukee, and obtained his permission. In June, Suydam moved to Navarino, and I went with him. He and his wife and I rode together, upon a large load of household belongings. Another boy, named Scott Robinson, soon joined us as chore boy, but not to learn the trade.

Suydam's materials soon arrived by boat—press, types, etc.; and together we manufactured two inking balls. Within two or three months I became fairly expert at composition. We worked along, in a rather crude fashion, for Suydam was really a poor printer, until the first of October. Then a soldier named John Wade was drummed out of

Fort Howard for some misdemeanor. Wade had been a printer, and Suydam hired him; but he was dissipated and unproficient, so after a month Suydam bade him go.

And still we got out no paper. We had done some job printing, but the newspaper project seemed to be a failure. In December, however, Andrew G. Ellis, another mission teacher, became Suydam's partner, and about the 10th or 11th of the month we struck off the first copy of the *Green Bay Intelligencer* .2

2 See history of the journal, in *Wis. Hist. Soc. Catalogue of Newspapers* (1898), p. 124.—Ed.

After a short time, Suydam retired from the enterprise, and I went to live with Ellis, where I had good board; my wages at first were $10 a month and board, but later I got as high as $25. I quit work in the fall of 1835. I might have continued much longer with Ellis, but the odor of the lye affected my lungs, and I was advised by Dr. David Ward, our school physician, to stop. The *Intelligencer* was not a profitable venture. Ellis suspended publication, and finally sold his plant (August, 1836) to H. O. and C. C. Sholes, who started the *Wisconsin Democrat* . I used occasionally to help them set type on this paper. Upon leaving Ellis, I became a clerk for Alexander J. Irwin, at Shantytown; he had failed in 1834, but had started up again. He remained in business this time, however, but three years— till 1838. His trade was almost wholly with the whites, although he occasionally bought tanned deer skins from the Indians. When Irwin gave up business, I went to Navarino, and clerked for Robert M. Eberts, who kept drugs and groceries, and had no Indian trade.

Solomon Juneau wrote to me in 1839, to go to work for him, in Milwaukee, and I went, although I did not stay long. My brother Andrew was, at this time, trading at Port Washington. There came to Milwaukee, about this time, from Cleveland, Ohio, two young men named — Monroe and —Page. They started a general store, and upon the advice of Juneau I went to work for them, my pay being $25 a month “and find myself.”

I remained but six months with Monroe & Page. Then Juneau got me a place with David George & Co., hats and caps, on East Water street. I boarded with George, upon the lake front, near where Juneau's statue now is. After staying with them for eighteen months, I received a letter from father, who wished me to help him in a little general store which he was conducting on Claim 14, in the town of Fort Howard. I went and staid, I believe, until the spring of 1843. Next, I went to Navarino, and became a clerk for William D. Colburn, a dry goods man whom I grew to admire. After two years with Colburn, I returned to father, 31 466 to stay with him another two years. My next venture was as captain of a freight boat, carrying cord-wood and lumber from Duck Creek and Suamico to Green Bay; my employer was Captain Gray, of Fort Howard. In the years 1848–49, I taught school in the town of Fort Howard. The wages were $10 a month; this is low, compared with present wages, but such positions and such pay were eagerly sought for in those old days.

Father becoming sick, I went to stay with him. He died in 1852. I then became a clerk for Joseph Paquette, of Green Bay, who, though a farmer, traded with the Menomonee Indians. For two years I kept his accounts, and went to the government payment grounds to collect for him.

Early in October, 1855, I went to Theresa, in Dodge County, where Solomon Juneau had a good store and a prosperous grist mill. I had merely stopped at Theresa to see him, being now headed for Kansas, whither my brother Louis had invited me. But Juneau was downhearted and begged me to stay with him. His wife was very ill, and died soon after. So I staid on with Juneau.

In October or November, 1856, we boxed up a lot of goods to take to the Indian payment at Shawano. We had four or five teams, one of which I myself drove. Driving across country to Fond du Lac, we loaded our goods on a little steamer, and Juneau went on with them to Shawano, while I returned to Theresa with the teams. When we parted, Juneau was much affected. With tears in his eyes, he said, “God bless you, my little brother! I pray

we may live to meet again." But that was the last I saw of him in life, for he died among his Indian friends, at the payment.

Upon reaching Theresa, I took charge of his store, and later, upon hearing of his death, helped straighten his affairs, and close up the establishment. Kirk White was the executor.

Now I bade good-bye to Theresa, and purposed at last going to Kansas. It was early winter when I went in a buggy to Mayville, and there took the railroad cars for Milwaukee. There I met my brother Amable, who said that 467 he too was going to join Louis in Kansas, in the spring, and wished me to wait and accompany him. Thus it was that I spent the winter of 1856–57, waiting on Amable, who who was ever delaying his Kansas trip, until it resulted that I never went at all.

It was just as well. During the winter, although I lived at Muskego, I renewed all my old Milwaukee acquaintances. All the early settlers knew my father and Juneau, and they got me an appointment as deputy sheriff under Israel Castle, of Pewaukee, then sheriff. I served under Castle throughout 1857–58, and by that time had made many warm friends in this district. Upon New Year's day, 1858, I married Miss Julia McNulty, of Muskego, and have lived happily in this place, ever since. In the spring of 1858, I was elected town clerk, in which office I served until 1880; for many of these years I was also deputy sheriff and at the same time a local constable. Since 1880, when I ceased holding these offices, I have been a justice of the peace.

I am frequently asked the native meaning of the word "Waukesha." Fifty years ago, *chekashskotah* (burnt prairie) was the Pottawattomie name of the river; only they added the syllables *seepee* (river), making it *chekashskotah-seepe* , (burnt prairie river). When the whites first came, they named their settlement "Prairieville," having reference to the English translation of this Indian name of the stream; but later they reverted to the local name *waugooshance* (little foxes), which had become corrupted into "Waukesha." When I was seven or eight years old, I used to go out to that region with Solomon Juneau and

my brothers. Each spring they would take five or six pack-horses, and visit Waukesha, Muskego, Mukwanago, and Oconomowoc. The last named was the best trading station of all, as the Indians would go there in larger numbers than elsewhere. On such expeditions, I always rode a pony, and was well swathed in blankets. Waukesha was to me the most interesting place, because there I used to go with the Indian boys and catch foxes upon the ridge to the west of the 468 river. This ridge was riddled with foxes' burrows. A prong on the end of a stick, with which to pull out the little foxes, was the most successful boyish method of capture. The skins could be sold, or made up into garments, and the fun of doing it was thought to be fine. Later, the traders discouraged this sport, as tending to exterminate the animals, and it was no longer followed. The ridge was often called by the Pottawattomie Indians, " *waugooshance* ," meaning simply "place of the little foxes;" occasionally we would hear some of the Indians call it *waugooshanceseepee* (little foxes' river); but this was not the usual name.

Of course, you can see that the corrupted word "Waukesha" means nothing; like so many other Western placenames, of Indian origin, it has, through ignorance and carelessness, been so twisted as to be almost unrecognizable and quite unmeaning. For instance: Muskego was originally *muskeekwak* (sun fish). Milwaukee is a corruption of *maunahwaukee* (place of the gathering of multitudes). Oconomowoc has been corrupted from the old name *oconnemiwing* (waterfall), meaning, in a large way, that the water here fell and expanded into lakes; curiously enough, this corruption becomes actually another Pottawattomie word, for *oconomowoc* really means "the gathering of the livers," which of course is a misapplication. Mukwanago is a corruption from *mukwa* (bear) and *onahko* (fat)—the fat bear. This was a popular place for hunting black bears; the greatest in the West, I used to be told. I have eaten of many that came from there. When the Indians of this region wanted to have a big feast, they would send young hunters thither, from all along the lake shore, even as far off as Kewaunee. Wauwatosa is from *wauwautawsa* (the lost brave), probably referring to some legend in which an Indian warrior was lost. Pewaukee is from *pewauki* (a ber opening, or scattered wood), which has been but

triflingly corrupted. *Wauki* in the Pottawattomie tongue, means “Water,” which accounts for the frequency of this termination in the place-names of southeast Wisconsin, where the Pottawattomies were once in force.

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A great many scholars of our Indian languages have tried their hand at the word Mississippi; but the most of them are wrong. I used to be told that it is a Menomonee word, *mashchechepee* (the great river). Of course one is apt to be led astray, in tracing phonetic resemblances in native languages;1 and I merely venture this derivation, because our people used to believe it, and we lived in very close relations with both Menomonees and Pottawattomies.

1 For a striking example of the dangers of confounding phonetic resemblances, see Verwyst's version of the origin of several of the foregoing place-names in *Wis. Hist. Colls*., xii, pp. 390–398. He differs materially from Vieau. It will be noticed that Vieau traces their roots mainly to the Pottawattomie tongue, and Verwyst to the Chippewa.— Ed.